



**HOUSATONIC VALLEY
COUNCIL OF ELECTED OFFICIALS**

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To the Honorable Members of the
Legislature's Transportation Committee:

February 24, 2009

I am providing testimony on Proposed Bill No. 425, "An Act Concerning the Improvement of the Norwalk to Danbury Train Line."

Greater Danbury's regional planning organization, the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials, is a long time advocate for Danbury Branch Train Line improvements. Please consider the following points:

**1. RECOGNIZE FAST GROWING
NORTH TO SOUTH COMMUTER FLOW**

Greater Danbury's growth is fueled by the fact that it is a rapidly growing commuter shed for the Norwalk and Stamford Areas. Many Stamford workers have sought housing in Greater Danbury, way out of proportion to population growth rates in Greater Danbury. This market is a key for north to south rail passenger service.

Consider that between 1990 and 2000 Newtown grew 21% while resident commuters to Stamford grew 31% (to 449), Bethel grew 3% while commuters to Stamford increased 15% (to 484), and Danbury grew 14% while its commuters to Stamford increased 42% (to 1274).

To the north, Brookfield grew 11% while commuters to Stamford increased 24% (to 183), and New Milford grew 15% while commuters to Stamford increased 118% (to 337).

These objective federal Census statistics prove that the Danbury Branch commuter passenger market is growing faster than Greater Danbury's significant population growth rate. These are excellent conditions for an enhanced central Fairfield County rail market.

**2. ACKNOWLEDGE POTENTIAL RIDERS
TO SOUTHERN FAIRFIELD COUNTY FROM
PROPOSED RAIL STATIONS NORTH OF DANBURY**

The Conn DOT computer projection model is used to estimate rail demand. In the past it has dimmed many hopes for transit improvements (not unfairly) by yielding low numbers of projected patrons to be attracted to rail.

Under study by Conn DOT is an extension of passenger rail service from Danbury north to New Milford, and the Conn DOT ridership model has been applied to it.

The conservative state model found that, if Branch Line service is extended to New Milford, daily southbound commuter boardings at the New Milford Station are estimated at a stunning 336 passengers. The model thus indicates a very strong market for rail service.

Daily Brookfield boardings, if a station is reestablished there, are estimated by Conn DOT at 85.

Overall if Danbury Branch service is extended to Brookfield and New Milford, total ridership on the Branch Line would increase by 37%, a very significant figure.

3. ADDRESS VERY LOW CONN DOT PRIORITY FOR COMPLETING DANBURY BRANCH LINE SERVICE EXPANSION STUDY

The origin of the current Conn DOT Danbury Branch Line Study was a special congressional appropriation to Conn DOT for this specific effort in 1999.

The goal was and remains a comprehensive rail service plan that can be logically split into staged and financially feasible segments.

Using these 1999 federal funds Conn DOT began the Branch Line Study in 2002. It is not near completion and has lost its way in recent years.

The Study's citizens group meets only once every 18 to 24 months. It is tough to keep morale up here in 2009 when people recall the big news in 1999 that the critically needed study was at last a reality.

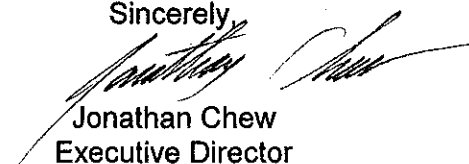
Can the Transportation Committee work with the DOT Commissioner to move up the Study's vague completion date?

This needed pressure pursues the critical path to success, as very little of a rail capital improvement plan, except for the underlying CTC, can be implemented until the current Conn DOT study is completed.

4. LOWEST COST PRACTICAL ACTION NOW IS TO IMPLEMENT THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE 2007 STATION BY STATION VISUAL INSPECTION REPORTS

What can be done quickly and very inexpensively to improve passenger amenities and signage at Branch Line stations? These low cost recommendations are contained in 2007 station by station reports by Conn DOT. These practical steps should be the short term focus.

Sincerely,



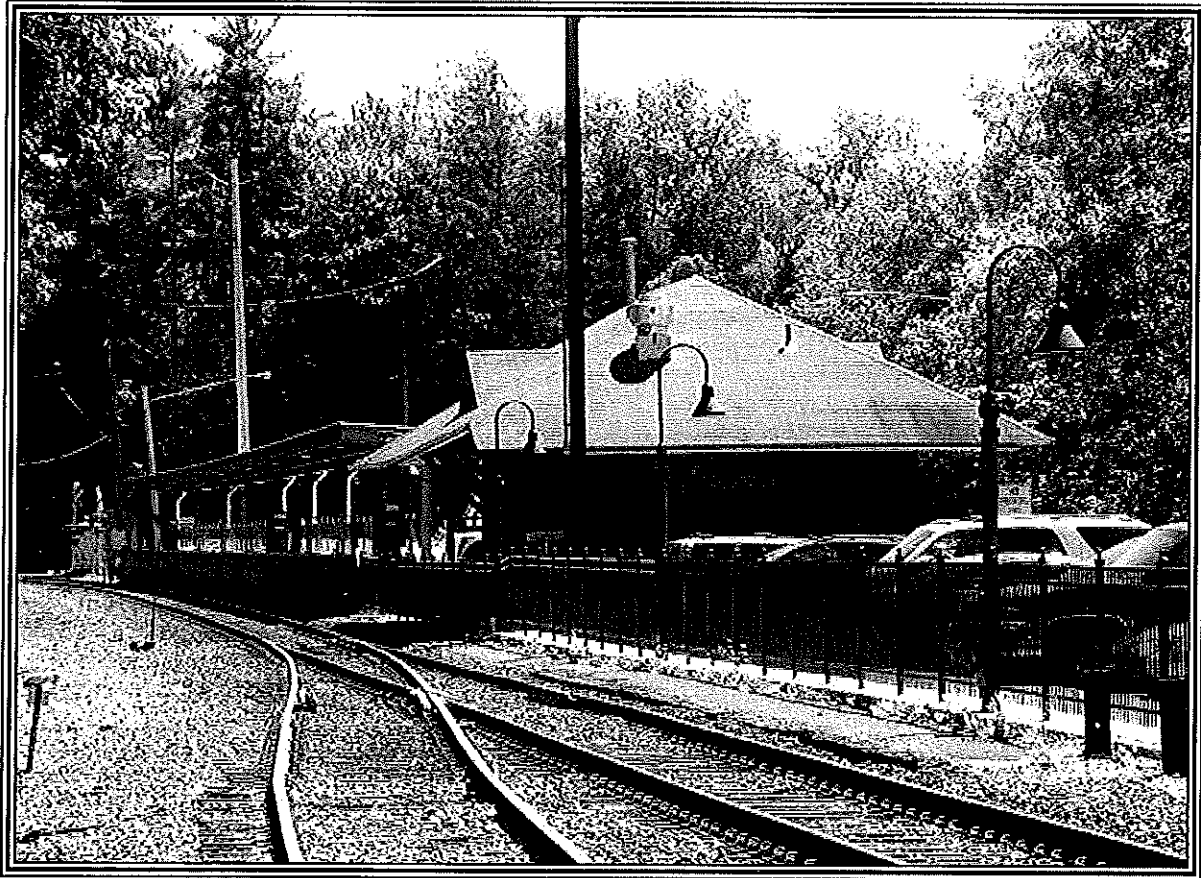
Jonathan Chew
Executive Director

- REPORT COVER -

INEXPENSIVE RECOMMENDATIONS
HAVE BEEN MADE FOR
EACH STATION

BRANCHVILLE TRAIN STATION

VISUAL INSPECTION REPORT



January 2007



Prepared by the Bureau of Public Transportation
Connecticut Department of Transportation

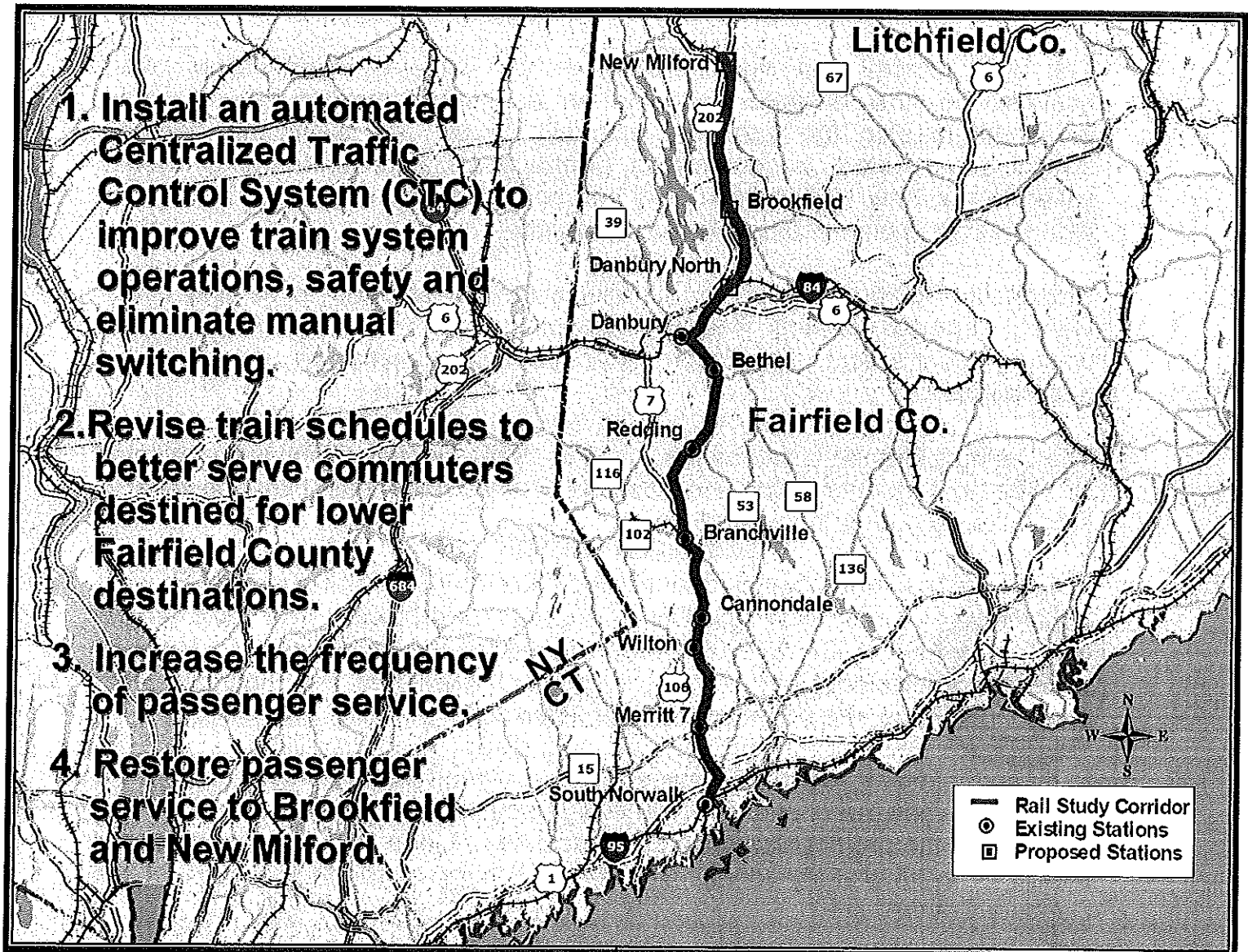
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DANBURY BRANCH LINE COMMUTER RAIL SERVICE

"TIME TO ACT"



DANBURY BRANCH LINE

Background Brief

- The 24 mile long Danbury Branch is a single track, non-electrified commuter rail line running between Danbury and Norwalk. In Norwalk, the Branch Line connects to the New Haven Main Line, which runs to Grand Central Terminal. The Danbury Branch carries approximately 750,000 passengers annually.
- The State of Connecticut owns the Danbury Branch Line and the train sets operating on the Line. Branch Line commuter service is operated by Metro-North Railroad, under contract to Conn DOT. Metro-North is a subsidiary of the State of New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority.
- Metro-North operates 11 weekday passenger trains in each direction on the Branch Line, basically the same level of service provided 100 years ago.
- Train service between Danbury and Norwalk is slower today than it was in 1925.
- The traffic control and signal system on the Danbury Branch Line, which controls the flow of train traffic, is an antiquated system requiring train personnel to stop the train and manually "throw" rail switches when line switching is required. An automated, Centralized Traffic Control (CTC) system linked to the New Haven Main Line has been programmed, with funding, but delayed from implementation for over a decade.
- Branch Line commuter service schedules remain oriented to serving Grand Central Terminal ridership, despite recognized changes in the demographics of western Connecticut that favor lower Fairfield County Journey to Work destinations.
- The Danbury Branch Line was electrified in 1925. Electrification was terminated in 1961 and re-electrifying the Danbury Branch Line has been considered several times during the past 35 years.

In 1971, federal funds destined for re-electrification of the Danbury Branch were transferred by Conn DOT to other more pressing projects. In a 1975 federal grant, "...a total of \$7,000,000 was assigned for re-electrification. However, while major electrical components were purchased and the materials were placed in storage, the project was again deferred."

In the early 1980's, Conn DOT once again proposed the re-electrification of the line, at an estimated cost of \$10,700,000. Construction was scheduled to begin in 1984 but the project was once again deferred. Conn DOT is currently in the middle of a new study to examine the feasibility of re-electrification of the Danbury Branch Line.

DANBURY BRANCH LINE

Opportunities for Immediate Service Improvements

The economy of Fairfield County has been the pre-eminent producer of high wage jobs and tax revenues to the State of Connecticut for the past 25 years. However, the transportation system serving this area has not kept pace with the mobility needs of the area's growing economy and population.

As a result of increased traffic congestion, employers have found prospective employees reluctant to live and work in an area where they would spend a significant portion of their day stuck in commuter traffic. As a result, the economy of Fairfield County is being placed at additional risk.

The Danbury Branch commuter rail line, which is located in the heart of the congested Route 7 Travel Corridor, is viewed as an underutilized resource of a desired comprehensive transportation system that is needed to adequately serve the residents and businesses of western and southwestern Connecticut. The improved utilization of this key transportation asset is immediately needed to help address Route 7 traffic congestion. The following are suggested actions to improve the utilization of this transportation resource.

1. Implement A Centralized Traffic Control System

Replace the present manual traffic control and signal system on the Danbury Branch Line with an automated, Centralized Traffic Control (CTC) system linking the Branch to the New Haven Main Line. "The object of this project is to construct a signal system which is compatible with the mainline system and is centrally controlled, which will allow safer and closer spacing of trains."

2. Revise Danbury Branch Train Schedules to Benefit Intra-State Travel

The current schedule of service on the Danbury Branch Line is primarily designed for commuters destined for Grand Central Terminal. This schedule should be revised to better meet the needs of commuters destined for employment sites in lower Fairfield County.

3. Increase the Frequency of Service

The current level of train service (22 weekday trips) should be increased to help this transportation asset achieve its competitive position within a more functionally balanced transportation system. (By way of comparison, the New Canaan Branch Line currently provides 40 weekday trips.)

This service enhancement is critically important, given the current level of Route 7 congestion. In addition, commuters face additional delays associated with Route 7 construction activities that will last at least 4 more years.

4. Restore Passenger Service to Brookfield and New Milford

A current Conn DOT study of the Danbury Branch is considering a variety of potential service enhancements, including improvements to the railbed and sidings, curvature issues and re-electrification. One improvement that could take place almost immediately, using existing equipment and without any additional feasibility analysis, is the restoration of passenger service to New Milford.

Ridership forecasts contained in the current Conn DOT study make it very clear that **the 14 mile extension of Branch service to New Milford is warranted**. The following summarizes the benefits and assumptions of extending Danbury Branch Line commuter service to New Milford:

- With the extension of service to New Milford, overall ridership on the Branch Line would increase by 36.5%!
- Daily boardings at the New Milford station are estimated at 336 passengers, greater than at any other station on the Danbury Branch Line.
- This proposed extension of service to New Milford would utilize the Branch Line's existing train sets running over existing tracks between Danbury and New Milford, operating at a maximum speed of 30 mph. Freight service on this portion of the line would operate at night, similar to freight service on the Danbury Branch.



Photo Courtesy of Bob Rush, New Milford

